



## **NEW “BOBWHITE BUFFERS” CAN INCREASE FARM INCOME AND QUAIL**

The Northern Bobwhite Quail has long been a valuable wildlife resource throughout the Tennessee landscape. The lonesome call of the male bobwhite signals the beginning and end of every new summer day and seems to tell us that everything is alright in the world, if we just stop long enough to listen. Unfortunately, the call of the bobwhite is a sound that is seldom heard in Tennessee today because quail numbers have dropped considerably over the last 30 years. Many reasons have been given for the demise of what was once the most popular game bird in North America. Quail biologists, research institutions, and even quail hunters have come to realize that many factors are at work that makes the land unsuitable for quail. Clean farming practices, urban sprawl, the introduction of cool season grasses such as fescue, and even predation have all led to this precipitous decline in quail numbers. However, biologists have found that by improving the existing habitat conditions on a given farm, quail numbers can respond rapidly if given the chance.

Because of this fact, many landowners have taken it upon themselves to begin the process of restoring the land to what it once was by working with government agencies such as the United States Department of Agriculture/Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA/NRCS), USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA), and the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) to develop an overall farm management plan that incorporates the idea of managing for wildlife while still farming the land. Programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) provide farmers the opportunity to remove highly sensitive cropland from production while receiving financial support from USDA to set aside that land. Under the guidelines of the program, this cropland typically is planted to “wildlife friendly” grassy cover that minimizes soil erosion while providing tremendous benefits for wildlife. In West Tennessee, the CRP program has been widely accepted by landowners for many years. As a result of this interest, this portion of the state has seen a drastic improvement in bobwhite quail numbers over the last few years. Recent monitoring of certain CRP lands in West Tennessee has actually shown a 200 percent increase in bobwhite abundance over the last 4 years! What does this mean for other Tennessee landowners? It means that the opportunity exists for others to participate in programs such as CRP in the hopes of bringing back the bobwhite quail.

On August 4, 2004, President Bush announced exciting new opportunities for restoring wildlife habitat on farmland through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). As mentioned earlier, CRP is a voluntary program that enables landowners to remove highly sensitive cropland from agricultural production in return for financial incentives and annual payments from USDA Farm Service Agency.

One of the major changes to the program is the addition of the CRP Northern Bobwhite Quail Habitat Initiative which introduces a conservation practice intended to create 250,000 acres of early successional grass buffers along agricultural field borders. This new CRP practice is known as CP33 - Habitat Buffers for Upland Birds (commonly referred to as “Bobwhite Buffers”.) USDA estimates that this nesting and brood-rearing cover will increase bobwhite quail numbers by 750,000 birds annually across the national range of quail. Planted buffers will also benefit other wildlife species while reducing soil erosion and improving water quality by trapping field sediments and nutrients.

If a landowner desires to enroll in the CRP program and meets basic land eligibility requirements, they may establish a field border around the perimeter of a crop field that can range from 30-120 feet in width. These borders can be planted to native grasses, an important nesting cover for quail, with cost-share provided by USDA. In addition, landowners will receive a one-time signing incentive payment of \$100 per acre, and annual rental payments for the life of the contract with USDA. In many cases, payments received through the CRP program will exceed what the landowner is currently making from crop production in these field border areas. A summary of the CRP financial incentives for the CP33 practice are as follows:

- \$100 per acre Signing Incentive Payment**
- 50% cost share provided by USDA for practice installment**
- 40% additional cost share provided by USDA from the Practice Incentive Payment (total of 90% cost share)**
- Receive annual rental payment for each acre enrolled for the life of the USDA contract.**

In order to keep these CRP acres in a “wildlife friendly” condition, landowners will be required to utilize what are known as mid-contract maintenance practices during the contract period. These are practices such as strip disking, legume interseeding, and prescribed burning, which help to prevent CRP fields from becoming too thick and dense for wildlife to utilize. Landowners will be able to choose which management options to use on their land and will also be provided cost share from USDA to perform these practices.

In addition to all of the financial incentives provided by USDA for these habitat buffers, an additional \$50 per acre incentive payment is also provided by Quail Unlimited, Inc. for landowners in 10 Middle Tennessee counties if they install the new CRP field border practice. These counties are Coffee, Franklin, Lincoln, Giles, Marshall, Maury, Sumner, Robertson, Montgomery, and Stewart. Once the practice is installed, payment will be distributed to the landowner from Quail Unlimited. However, there is a limited amount of money available for the Quail Unlimited incentive, so funding will be distributed to landowners on a first come, first serve basis until the money is allocated. These 10 counties represent a focus area in Middle Tennessee that was established last year for bobwhite quail through a National Fish & Wildlife Foundation Grant that was obtained through the efforts of Quail Unlimited and the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency.

Signup for the new CRP field border practice began on October 1, 2004 at local USDA Service Centers across the state. There is a limited amount of acres available for this program and farmers are encouraged to sign up early if they are interested.

For additional information, contact your local USDA Service Center or the following NRCS Biologists: West Tennessee, Mike Hansbrough at 731/668-0700, Extension 112; Middle Tennessee, Chris Wolkonowski at (615) 893-9295, Extension 112; East Tennessee, Robin Mayberry at 865/523-3338, Extension 113.